

Helping Make Travel and Tourism a National Priority

By Sam Farr

Courier Magazine

June 2009

As far as economic sectors go, the travel and tourism industry is one of the more difficult to define. As a whole, the range of businesses that make up the travel sector is enormous, from airlines, hotels and tour operators to restaurants, rental car companies and convention centers. Combine each of those diverse components and you have one of the nation's largest employers and a significant economic engine for the national economy.

In the past that coming-together rarely happened, leaving its vast potential to influence federal policies important to the industry untapped. Luckily, times are changing and we're seeing a much more organized use of the travel industry's power. I'd like to take this opportunity to explain how Washington is playing a key role in this evolution and how tour operators and others in the travel and tourism field can help.

A quick review: the U.S. Travel Association reports that in 2007, the travel industry employed 7.7 million Americans and accounted for nearly \$750 billion in spending. That's an enormous contribution to the nation's pocketbook, right around 5 percent of our gross domestic product.

But because each facet of the travel industry has historically stood on its own, it has taken some time for the industry to come together. But in the last few years, we've seen a focused move to combine forces, with an engaged travel industry bringing its messages to Washington and walking the halls of Congress.

As co-chair of the Congressional Travel and Tourism Caucus, I've taken the lead in the House of Representatives to advocate for travel as a national priority and a way to jumpstart our economy. After all, each of the nation's 435 congressional districts benefit from tourism.

If you're unfamiliar with congressional caucuses, they're basically interest groups that are

formed by members of Congress around particular issues, demographics and geography. The Congressional Travel and Tourism Caucus, known as the CTTC, has about 100 members and continues to grow.

One simple thing you can do to help the travel industry increase its influence in Washington is call your Representative and ask him or her to join the caucus. Members of the House are all very close to their constituents and respond to this type of request. And the more members we have in the CTTC, the more effective the caucus will be and the more individuals we can educate on issues important to the industry.

The caucus has really ramped up its work in the last couple years. My co-chair for this group, Rep. Roy Blunt from Missouri, is a great supporter of travel and tourism, and we're making what we hope are lasting inroads on a wide range of issues.

Most recently, several members of the CTTC spoke on the House floor about the need to tone down the anti-business travel rhetoric that has accompanied economic recovery activities in Washington. The need to differentiate between wasteful spending and legitimate, necessary business travel is absolutely necessary. Since business travel accounts for around one-third of travel nationwide, it's vital that we support this sector of the larger travel industry.

There are also a number of issues that are important from the tour operator's point of view. Lately, several issues regarding international visitors to the United States have taken center stage.

Visas have long been a sticking point for travelers wishing to visit the United States. Long backlogs have existed and the process has often been a painful one for many potential travelers. Through my seat on the House Appropriations Committee, which funds the government, I have advocated for a greater share of funds for the State Department to minimize visa waits, and we're beginning to see success.

The United States also recently made some changes to its Visa Waiver Program. Before these changes took effect in January, visitors from many countries didn't require a visa to enter our country. Now, travelers from visa waiver countries (there are 35 nations currently in the program) must receive electronic authorization to travel. While this is not a complicated step, it's

one that visitors must be aware of before they attempt to travel.

Finally, most tour operators are already aware of the new Western Hemisphere Travel Initiatives rule for passports. This rule, effective June 1, requires that any U.S. citizen coming back into the United States must have a valid passport, even if entering from Canada, Mexico or other Western countries that previously didn't require this document. This includes those traveling by car, bus, ship, plane or any other type of transportation.

In the past, implementation of WHTI rules for passports created a massive backlog in the State Department, with many hopeful travelers waiting several months for their passport. Many were forced to change plans because of this problem. It's vital that we plan ahead for these types of changes (both the government and individual travelers), and the CTTC has been working closely with the State Department to make sure the transition is seamless.

My interest in travel and the effect it has on people began during my Peace Corps service in Colombia. While there, I learned just how transforming exposure to other cultures can be, both for the traveler and for the host. This is most apparent when Americans travel to foreign lands or play host to visitors from far away.

But it's just as important for Americans to travel domestically -- maybe even more important in these tough economic times. When I speak about travel and tourism, I always try to bring it down to a personal level. I encourage families to get out and explore their country, meet their fellow Americans and enjoy all the things that make us different.

But getting more Americans to travel isn't a job that we can do individually. It will take a concerted effort by the travel industry, speaking in a united voice and joined by an engaged Congress, to accomplish this.

I look forward to working with all of you to bring this about, and I encourage you to reach out to your Representative and ask that they support your priorities by joining the Congressional Travel and Tourism Caucus and advocating for travel-friendly policies.

(Congressman Sam Farr, a fifth-generation Californian, has represented the state's beautiful Central Coast in Congress for 16 years. His district encompasses Monterey County's Big Sur coastline, Pebble Beach and Carmel; the "salad bowl" of Salinas Valley; the redwoods, mountains and beaches of Santa Cruz County; and the rural landscape of San Benito County.)